

1. An occasional newsletter of the History Program, RSSS

## Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of *Footnotes*, an occasional newsletter of the History Program, RSSS. In this age of escalating electronic information, we think there is an opportunity for some old-fashioned paper-based stories about ourselves. The newsletter will come out as often or as infrequently as is necessary and fun. We hope that it will help our small community to become more aware of the amazing range of things we all do, much of which is not necessarily visible in the corridors of Coombs, and some of which cannot be measured by formal processes of university accountability and reportage. If you have a story, report or reflection for this or future issues, please send or give them to Tom Griffiths, Tim Sherratt or Kay Nantes.

## South African historian visits RSSS

Dr Jane Carruthers has arrived from South Africa as a Visiting Fellow in the History Program from 7 August to 5 October. She is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of South Africa (Pretoria) with responsibility for courses on Heritage issues, pre-colonial South African history, philosophy and theory of history and the MA coursework programme. Jane had a previous Visiting Fellowship in the RSSS History Program in 1999, an association that resulted in her collaboration with Dr Tom Griffiths and others in the project *Inflows: The Channel Country* that comprised an environmental study of Australian inland water systems with particular reference to Coopers Creek, and a number of papers and a chapter comparing indigenous land claims in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park with those in Uluru-Kata Tjuta. This last essay was published in the book *Social History and African Environments* edited by William Beinart and JoAnn McGregor (Oxford, James Currey, 2003). Since arriving at RSSS, Jane has heard that she has been awarded the Chancellor's Research Prize by the University of South Africa.

Jane's most recent publication (edited with Anthony Hall-Martin) is a magnificently illustrated book called *South African National Parks: A Celebration*, published for the World Parks Congress to be held in Durban in September 2003. It will be launched in Canberra on 1 September 2003 at the National Museum of Australia's Visions Theatre at

5.15pm. Jane will give a short lecture on *Environmental History and National Parks: a South African Perspective*, followed by the launch of Jane's book (by Brian Walker). Then a related Australian book will be launched: *Indigenous Kinship with the Natural World in New South Wales*, written by Deborah Rose, Diana James and Christine Watson (launched by Terry Korn). Phil Sullivan, a Ngiyampaa traditional owner who works with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, will respond. Please come along!

(RSVP: 6208 5021, or [bookings@nma.gov.au](mailto:bookings@nma.gov.au))

## Projects and passions — *The human elements*

Tim Sherratt

It's raining, the house smells damp, the dam in the paddock next door is overflowing, and baby Lizzie is coughing—yet another cold? It's hard to believe there's a drought. But it's the averages that count, I remind myself, as I scrape the mud off my boots. Will it rain next month, and the month after that? How much do we actually need to begin to right the averages? I can look at the clouds, feel the rain; I can observe the water levels in the dam. But how do I know when the drought is over?

At the 'Climate and culture in Australia' conference last year, I asked the assembled climate professionals how many recalled the summers of their childhood as being hotter than those of recent times. Most raised their hands, despite the fact that averages were against them. Memory doesn't always mesh with statistics.

It's gaps like these, between the experience of weather and our understanding of climate, that we intend to explore as part of our ARC-funded project, *The human elements: a cultural history of Australian weather*. Climate has obviously proved a major influence on the history of human occupation in Australia, and yet it's not something we can experience directly. Our understanding of climate develops over time, through analysis and abstraction, still we live it each day as a series of sensations, memories, expectations and hopes.

Where do we start? We can't avoid drought, of course, and I'll be scouring journals, diaries and letters, for stories that can take us inside the statistics. The development of forecasting might provide an interesting opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of certainty in a climate ruled by



Dr Jane Carruthers is the author of a number of books, the most important of which are:

- *Wildlife and Warfare: The Life of James Stevenson-Hamilton* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001), which was nominated for the Alan Paton award for non-fiction in 2002
- *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press, 1995)
- with co-author Marion Arnold, *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, (Cape Town: Fernwood Press, 1995)

variability. And what about the whole idea of an 'Australian' climate—what do we mean by that?

I (together with Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin) will be working with both the National Museum of Australia and the Bureau of Meteorology to produce not just a book, but web resources, public events, and an exhibition brief. We'll be interested in hearing your weather stories as well. Do you remember those hot summers, those dramatic thunderstorms that we just don't seem to get any more? Weather figures prominently in all our life histories.

Meanwhile in Gunning the rain continues to fall, and Lizzie is definitely under the weather.

### Profile – Professor Rod Home



*Rod Home* is a Visiting Fellow in the History Program for the next three months (until October 17). Rod retired earlier this year from the chair of History and Philosophy of Science that he had held at the University of Melbourne since

1975. While in Canberra he will be working on aspects of the history of science in Australia, a subject on which he has published extensively.

#### What is your favourite archives or library?

The Royal Society of London.

#### What has been your most exciting research discovery?

I had been working through a microfilm of some of Isaac Newton's manuscripts, trying to reach some understanding of how his thinking about the nature of electricity had evolved during a crucial few years at the beginning of the 18th century. And I had got to the point where I thought I could see a way of making sense of the various surviving documents and establishing a chronological order among them. However, my reconstruction implied that two exposures some distance apart on the microfilm were closely related to each other - much more closely, indeed, than a bunch of items that came in between. So I wrote to the Manuscripts Librarian at Cambridge and asked him what the original documents looked like. And he wrote back to say that the two exposures I thought should be related were in fact the two halves of a single folded sheet, and the intervening items on the film were loose sheets that had been stuffed inside the folded sheet at some stage. I was very pleased! It gave me considerable faith in the correctness of my overall reconstruction of the development of Newton's thought in those years.

#### What book or article has influenced you most?

I guess this has to be Tom Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which I read while I was in graduate school, soon after it came out. I say this, even though I have always seriously disagreed with many of the things Tom says in the book. Until then, the history of science I had been studying was all very much after the style of

Alexandre Koyré - close textual analysis of the writings of iconic figures in the history of science such as Aristotle, Galileo, Descartes and Newton. What I learned from Kuhn was the importance of also looking at the way in which ideas moved around within intellectual communities; and that's more or less what I have tried to do, ever since.

#### What do you believe to be a historian's most important skill?

Integrating evidence from a variety of sources to construct a convincing explanation of past events.

#### Given unlimited time and resources, what is the book you'd most like to write?

An account of the transformation of traditional natural philosophy into something recognisably like the modern scientific discipline of physics (covering roughly the period 1650-1850). I once set out to do this but found it very difficult. And then I got sidetracked into studying the history of Australian science. I'd still like to give it a try, though!

#### Ins and outs

- ← Tim Rowse to Professor of Australian Studies, Harvard University, August 2003 – July 2004
- Rod Home (Visiting Fellow), 21 July-20 October
- Jane Carruthers (Visiting Fellow), 7 August-5 October
- Tim Sherratt (Postdoctoral Fellow)

#### Doctoral scholars

(Keep an eye on future editions for profiles of our new doctoral scholars)

- Maxine Pitts, *Historical Consciousness and Multiculturalism in Far North Queensland*
- Wendy Way, *A biography of F L McDougall*
- Joy McCann, *The unsettled country: landscape, history and change in the Australian wheatbelt*
- ← Tim Sherratt, *Atomic wonderland: science and progress in twentieth century Australia*, submitted in July

#### Your contributions wanted!

As well as general news about goings-on in the History Program, *Footnotes* hopes to document the fascinating lives and activities of those who inhabit the corridors of Coombs. Regular sections will include:

**Out of hours** – Describe your unknown enthusiasms and abilities. Is there life beyond history?

**Adventures in archives** – Found something quirky on your latest research expedition?

**Public profile** – Have you been observed purveying history to the world outside?

**Projects and passions** – Share your latest explorations, obsessions and ideas.

Supply your contributions to Tom Griffiths, Tim Sherratt, or Kay Nantes or email to [tim@discontents.com.au](mailto:tim@discontents.com.au)